

On Memorial Day, we come together as Americans to honor the sacrifice of those who have died in service to this great nation. From the American Revolution to the World Wars, to our fights in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, all who were taken from us in defense of our country are remembered.

In recent years, nearly 6,000 Americans have died serving on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan. Regardless of our opinions of these wars, we can all agree that those who made the ultimate sacrifice must be held in the highest regard.

We must also remember, however, that honoring this sacrifice cannot be achieved with words alone. Instead, we must continue working to improve the safety of our troops still in harm's way and work to ensure that the veterans who bear the visible and invisible scars of war are treated with the utmost respect and provided the highest level of care.

One thing that often goes unrealized is that half of those who died in Afghanistan and Iraq did so while delivering fuel to the front lines. These refueling convoys put our uniformed men and women directly in enemy cross-hairs, making them vulnerable to ambush or an IED attack. To address this problem, last week the House of Representatives approved two provisions I co-authored.

The first would direct the Pentagon to consider energy efficiency when purchasing warzone structures. For example, the Department of Defense spends billions every year to heat and cool tents for which hundreds of refueling convoys are needed. The second provision, would require our armed forces to evaluate energy efficiency programs and make recommendations on how to deploy them. A more energy efficient U.S. military will not only save lives it will also save taxpayer dollars, which can then be used to support our troops when they come home.

We have also made great strides in improving benefits for veterans, over 44,000 of whom I am proud to represent. In the previous Congress, we enacted a new law to restore the promise of a full, four-year college education to those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. We made the largest single increase in funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs in history, increasing the number of doctors and nurses and improving care for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injuries. Today, we have got to do everything we can to preserve and strengthen these advancements.

In addition to improving benefits for veterans, we have also got to stand up for their families, whose sacrifice often goes unseen: the family that spends tens of thousands out of its own pockets to provide care to a wounded son; the military spouses who anxiously await a returning soldier; the children who lie awake and wonder if their mom or dad will make it home for their next birthday.

That is why I have voted to provide more funding for military child care centers and better family housing. Its also why I worked to pass landmark legislation that gives much needed support for family members and caregivers to wounded veterans - because this sacrifice should no longer go unnoticed. Still, we need to do so much more.

After high school, I had the honor of serving two years on a United States Naval destroyer in the Pacific. I was lucky enough to not see the worst horrors of war. To those who have, and to those who died, we owe an unending debt of gratitude. Their sacrifice cannot be repaid, but as I now serve in Congress, I am sure going to continue trying.

*A version of this appeared in the Times Herald Record, The Press & Sun Bulletin, The Ithaca Journal and online at DailyFreeman.com.*